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ABSTRACT

In composition journals, graduate classrooms, and informal discussions among writing teachers, there is a lot of talk about liberation, empowerment, student voice, dialogue, critical thinking, and democratic teaching--the familiar tropology of critical pedagogy. This nomenclature seems to have permeated the field of composition, across theoretical positions, so that the tropics of empowerment have actually exceeded the bounds of critical pedagogy and achieved a sort of hegemony. However, while ostensibly claiming to be about liberation, empowerment is actually about containment. This can be seen through a close examination of the vocabulary and phrasing in Ira Shor's provocative book "Empowering Education," in which the teacher is constructed, in the Enlightenment tradition, as the liberator and possessor of power and the student as the individual who embodies lack. One instructor at the University of Utah, though, has found that his students know more than he does about the television they watch, the music they listen to, and the world wide web they explore on the computer. Instructors must cease to think of their relationship to their students in terms of the Socratic teacher/student dyad and begin thinking in terms of something like a professional/client relationship. They must acknowledge that students know more than they think they do and they must help them realize this. (TB)

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Father Knows Best: Liberatory Pedagogy and the Tropics of Containment

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From the diary of a six year old boy at the American School in Tangier Morocco:
"I get up at 8:30. I eat my breakfast. Then I go to the job."
When asked what he meant by the job he said, "school of course."
-Quoted in *The Job: Interviews With William Burroughs*

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The wry sentiment expressed in this epigraph from Burroughs represents my suspicion that students may have a very different idea of what is going on in the composition classroom than we as teachers do. It also represents my desire to rethink the way we view the practices and tactics of students. In composition journals, graduate classrooms, and informal discussions among writing teachers, there is a lot of talk about liberation, empowerment, student voice, dialogue, critical thinking, and democratic teaching—the familiar tropology of critical pedagogy. This nomenclature seems to have permeated the field of composition, across theoretical positions, so that the tropics of empowerment have actually exceeded the bounds of critical pedagogy and achieved a sort of hegemony. Yet I'm hoping that by looking at them one more time, we can see how the tropics of empowerment, while ostensibly claiming to be about liberation, are really about containment. They contain students within a discourse in which the teacher possesses power and holds the key to student empowerment. Liberatory pedagogy reinstates a teacher/student dyadic couple in which the teacher is, to borrow Lacan's terminology, the "subject-presumed-to-know," while the student is characterized by lack.

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We can see what I mean by looking at the language used to portray the teacher/student relationship in a section from Ira Shor's provocative book

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Empowering Education. Shor's text describes teachers and students in a way that I think will sound familiar. It is language most of us might use to describe our teaching. But I hope that by drawing attention to it we will begin to reconsider. In the introduction to *Empowering Education* Shor describes his first day of teaching in a basic writing class at what he refers to as a "low-budget public college in New York City" (1). On that day, the class greeted him with a stony silence that was not broken until one student finally vocalized his dissatisfaction with the school's writing test. Soon, the entire class began to assert its unanimous opposition to the placement test. This is how Shor describes the scene: "To my amazement, this silent group began an avalanche of remarks. The students found their voices, enough to carry us through a ferocious hour, once I found a "generative" theme, an issue generated from the problems of their own experience" (3). Shor goes on to observe that this ferocious discussion "was dizzying until [he] managed to assert some order" (4). He then suggests that he had to "give some structure and depth" (4) to the perception of the unfairness of the writing exam by having students write about it. This is how Shor describes their written responses: "They had much to say, displayed broad vocabularies, and spoke fairly grammatically. I encouraged them to use already existing good grammar in their speaking voices to help improve their less-developed writing hands" (4).

The constructions of teachers, students, and classrooms that characterize Shor's conception of liberatory pedagogy reinscribe familiar hierarchical structures. We might notice that it is the teacher who must "assert some order" and lend "structure and depth" to what is apparently disorderly and depthless student knowledge. Student voices, previously lost, are now found, but only after the teacher has provided a properly

"generative" theme. The class's resistance is a raw or amateur discourse that must be refined. Students may display "broad vocabularies" and already speak "fairly grammatically" but they are, according to Shor's text, nevertheless clearly deficient; their "less-developed writing hands," for example, are in need of improvement. The scenario Shor depicts is one in which students enter the writing classroom in order to be shaped by an empowering teacher who knows, in advance, where the best interests of these students lie. In short, the critical pedagogue is uniquely qualified to frame critical consciousness and direct students' acquisition of knowledge.

Shor's empowering program is more specifically outlined in a chapter entitled "Critical Dialogue versus Teacher-Talk." The ostensible point of this chapter is to provide specific ways in which teachers can share authority in the classroom through a dialogic method. Shor's method is designed to transform "the teacher's unilateral authority by putting limits on his or her dominating voice and calling on the students to codevelop a joint learning process" (90). However, Shor's idea of what constitutes codevelopment and the sharing of authority become problematic. Listen to the language used to describe students: they are "mystified," "lack a framework," "have trouble understanding," "do not notice", and "cannot define" their worlds. They are unable to "perceive meaning in their culture"; they cannot "read the politics in their society." Students "*need* a democratic education" and "*need* a critical education" so that they will be able to "read the politics in their society when they read the printed word" (91, my emphasis). Now, listen to the language used to describe the teacher: he or she "draws out," "develops," "clarifies," "connects", "differentiates," and "re-presents" student voices. The teacher assesses "cognitive and political development" in order to determine appropriate strategies for developing critical consciousness. The teacher fills

student needs by enabling perception and providing the skills necessary to interpret political reality. Liberatory pedagogy constructs students who lack power, knowledge, and the cognitive tools necessary to understand the world. It is the liberatory pedagogue who possesses power, disseminates knowledge, and enables students to understand the truth that the teacher knows.

If we historicize the tropology of critical pedagogy we can see it as part of the legacy of the Enlightenment-oriented tradition that has permeated composition since its inception. As Susan Miller reminds us, the origin of composition is part of those "vernacular language studies [that] began in the nineteenth-century as specifically *cultural* pedagogies" (156). This project was "designed to colonize mass populations [such as] American immigrants and reconstructed Southerners" (156). It was for these masses that "an only recently standardized written English and a newly designated 'national' literature would replicate a failing religious means of control" (156). Miller rightly suggests that this is old news. But what is perhaps not old news is critical pedagogy's complicity in a continuing enforcement of this project. Like the nineteenth-century narrative of composition's origins, the students in Shor's account have been "culturally hailed to a lower status than [their] teachers" (159). The student subject imagined by the purveyors of liberatory pedagogy is actually "an object—of pedagogical surveillance undertaken as a mode of conversation, 'involvement,' and condescension" (159). Like the nineteenth-century pedagogical object Miller describes, the student body portrayed by critical pedagogy is "collective, a 'populace'" (159); a massive Other which teachers must shape and direct toward critical consciousness.

The classroom envisioned by critical pedagogy is mediated by an empowering, liberatory teacher who is constructed as an enlightened (and Enlightenment) individual who possess power as personal property and is

capable of sharing it or passing it on to students. Shor's list of empowering practices contains a number of productive ideas, but it is still the teacher who makes the rules for his new and improved classroom. It is the teacher who does the drawing out, the inviting, and the summarizing of student knowledge. It is the teacher who re-presents that knowledge in a form that students will now understand. Familiar dichotomies remain firmly in place: us and them, literacy and illiteracy, critical pedagogue and student. Critical pedagogy imagines students as either illiterate or having the "wrong" literacy. Students are totalized as uninitiated amateurs, a construction which ignores the broad range of literacies students bring to the classroom. In addition, the classroom itself, like the corresponding notions of teachers as knowers and students as culturally deficient, is universalized. The classroom becomes, through the mediation of a "good" teacher, a privileged site in which complex cultural power relations are somehow rendered manageable. But as Laurie Finke has pointed out, this staging of cultural conflicts in composition courses assumes that "the classroom is a universal and ahistorical space, rather than a local and particular space embedded within a specific institutional culture that serves a range of disciplinary and institutional objectives" (8).

These universalized categories of classroom, teacher, and student theorized by liberatory pedagogy do not coincide with my experiences in a particular local culture. There it is clear that other cultural sites of learning intersect with a university education in ways that render moot the alleged shaping of students which critical pedagogy imagines. There it is clear that students are split subjects whose family and church discourses simultaneously resist and uphold the "American Way". Because of their religious training, by the time they reach a college writing classroom, most

University of Utah students have been actively writing and speaking in public for more than ten years. My students know more than I do about the television they watch, the music they listen to, and being active on the world wide web. We tend to view these as mass-produced discourses which are complicit with dominant ideologies. But I have found students to be very skilled at locating strains of resistance in them. That they may not readily share this information with me as a teacher is not a sign that resistance does not exist. Critical pedagogy elides this extra-curricular material by arguing that we teach students to "get over" what they've learned before we get our hands on them. The "good teacher" who fills student lack is a recycled version of the Socratic model and assumes that the classroom is *the* primary site in which learning takes place. But I would argue, the university is one site of learning among many and the world of the student is a source of knowledge that can teach us. With these observations in mind, I'd like to offer a few suggestions.

First, the knowledge and resources students bring to the writing classroom should not be perceived as a sign of deficiency, but as a potential source of knowledge-making. Second, we must recognize the variety of uses students may be imagining for their classroom experiences, some of which may run counter to what we have in mind. Third, instead of maintaining a revised Socratic model of the teacher/student dyad, we might begin thinking in terms of something like a professional/client relationship. Fourth, we must acknowledge that students know more than we think they know and allow them to recognize this. Finally, in addition to seeing student silence as a potential sign of resistance, we must also be aware that playing other roles, including that of "good student," may also be a form of subtle resistance.

It seems that the containment embedded in the tropology of liberatory pedagogy stems from the desire to preserve the teacher as an important shaper of young lives. Moreover, the critical pedagogue is, as Jennifer Gore, Elizabeth Ellsworth, Carmen Luke, and others have pointed out, a decidedly male-coded subject. He is, to use Ingolfur Johannesson's phrase, "capable of resisting and entitled to lead" (299). A merging of classic liberalism and western European Marxism "has become a model of resistance and leadership in critical pedagogy. Above other routes, the access to this subject lies in traditional elite education....Gramsci, a product of an elite education himself, recommended traditional schooling to educate the working class (read: *men* of the working class), and little in the literature on critical pedagogy signals a substantial shift from the reliance on the notion of a unitary, rational subject" (301). Critical pedagogy retains the privileging of the literacy one acquires at the university and ignores or denigrates the numerous literacies students may bring to that privileged site. The fear that students may be learning important information elsewhere or using their classroom experiences in unintended ways seems to me to be at the root of a critical pedagogy whose subtext is, despite objections to the contrary, that father still knows best.